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I-25: Should voters elect an official to manage elections?

By Keith Ervin

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Three years after King County Elections' sloppy handling of ballots became an issue in Gov. Christine Gregoire's narrow victory, voters will decide whether they want to change the way elections are managed.

But this will be done in two steps, beginning with the Nov. 6 election.

If voters pass Initiative 25, they would vote again in November 2008 on an amendment to the county charter that would put elections in the hands of an elected, rather than an appointed, official.

The first election of an elections director would be in February 2009.

Two review panels were set up to study problems in the Elections Office after the GOP contested the 2004 governor's election. The panels — one appointed by County Executive Ron Sims, the other by the County Council — recommended electing a nonpartisan auditor or director to manage elections.

The council-appointed Citizens' Election Oversight Committee (CEOC) also suggested separating records and licensing functions from the elections office, another change I-25 would implement.

Unlike Washington's 38 other counties, which have elected auditors, elections in King County are managed by a director of records, elections and licensing services who is appointed by the county executive.

"The key issue is accountability," said I-25 organizer Toby Nixon, a former Republican state legislator. He says the proposed charter amendment would "split off the dogcatcher duties" from a new stand-alone elections department, and put an elected director in charge.

"How do we create a culture of excellence within the Elections Office, which we haven't seen in King County Elections so far? Both the Independent Task Force on Elections and the CEOC said that the best way to bring this about would be to have this office be headed by a nonpartisan elected official who is directly accountable to the voters," Nixon said.

Secretary of State Sam Reed and former KIRO-TV anchor Susan Hutchison, now executive director of the Charles Simonyi Fund for the Arts and Sciences, joined Nixon in signing the voters-pamphlet statement in favor of I-25.

Opponents say the charter amendment would undermine the professionalism of the elections office. They also say it flies in the face of the county charter's concept of putting the county executive in charge of the county's executive branch and holding him accountable for the performance of the managers he appoints.

The Municipal League of King County and the League of Women Voters of Seattle and South King County oppose the initiative.

County Councilmember Larry Phillips, D-Seattle, who opposes the change, said, "The freeholders modernized county government and, more importantly, gave the voters a very strong sense of who's accountable. The more

you fragment that accountability, the harder it is over time to figure out who's in charge of what."

Virginia Gunby, one of the "freeholders" who wrote the 38-year-old home-rule charter, said the initiative would make the election director "a very political office" rather than a position filled on the basis of professional qualifications.

Republicans on the King County Council have been trying since 2003 to change the county charter to put elections management in the hands of an elected official.

When it became clear the County Council wouldn't put the issue on the ballot, I-25 was circulated and turned in with 74,000 signatures.

Those efforts were repeatedly blocked by the council's Democratic majority. Councilmember Bob Ferguson, D-Seattle, last year supported a Republican charter-amendment proposal, but then said the idea should be pushed back to 2009 to give Sims more time to recruit an appointed elections director.

Democrats last month rejected the proposal by Ferguson to let voters choose between I-25 and an alternative that would hold the first election of an election director in August and November of 2009 rather than February 2009. Ferguson said the initiative was "fatally flawed" because the elections director would be chosen in a costly February election without a primary.

Neither side has raised funds for an active campaign. Nixon said supporters decided to write the initiative after a poll showed voters favored the elected-elections director idea by a three-to-one margin.

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